

An Enhanced Logistics Section Required:
Logistical Agility of a Marine Corps Infantry Battalion in the
Counterinsurgency Fight

Captain JA Meads

Major DM Phillippi, CG 10

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Operations in Iraq and Afghanistan during the past six years have proven that counterinsurgency (COIN) operations will be a major focus of the Marine Corps' future planning and training. In the Marine Corps Vision and Strategy 2025, General James Conway states:

Our Corps must serve credibly as a persistently engaged and multicapable force, able to draw upon contributions from our Total Force, in order to address the full range of contingencies the future will undoubtedly present. In short, we must be prepared to move with speed, "live hard," and accomplish any mission.¹

This statement echoes many doctrinal COIN principles and confirms that the Marine Corps must prepare for COIN environments beyond Iraq and Afghanistan. However, current Marine Corps combat service support organizations do not provide adequate flexibility to counter the logistical demands of a COIN fight, specifically at the infantry battalion level. In order to solve the deficit of logistical capability experienced by Marine Corps infantry battalions engaged in COIN operations, it is essential to allocate permanent organic medium lift assets and operators both on the battlefield and in garrison.

¹ *Marine Corps Vision and Strategy 2025: Executive Summary* (Washington, D.C., 2008), 2.

The COIN Logistical Web and the Needs of the Commander

While the battalion commander focuses on improving Logical Lines of Operation (LLO), the logistician's focus in a COIN fight is on maintaining a responsive and efficient distribution network that satisfies logistical requirements in a timely manner.² The logistician is challenged with balancing stockage of supplies, distribution methods, and immediate support requirements for Marine forces, host nation security forces, as well as the general populace. Doctrinally, Marine forces establish forward operating bases (FOB) in order to provide a secure location from which the unit can influence the population and deter insurgent activity. Each of these positions comes with a logistical price tag. The price includes sustainment of Marine forces, support for local security forces, and the support needs of the immediate population. What results is a web consisting of lines of communication between established FOBs that must flex to meet the rapidly changing needs of COIN operations.³ The Marine Corps Warfighting Publication (MCWP) 3-33.5 *Counterinsurgency* states:

In COIN operations, logisticians must provide support through a careful mix of supply based or supply point practices with distribution based on unit distribution

² FM 3-24/MCWP 3-33.5, *Counterinsurgency* (Washington, D.C., 2006), 8-3.

³ FM 3-24/MCWP 3-33.5, *Counterinsurgency*, 8-5.

methods. Situations can swiftly develop that require equally rapid logistic responses to prevent further deterioration of security conditions.⁴

To give the web flexibility, logisticians must ensure a balance between efficient dispersion of assets and maintaining a reserve capability to react to immediate demands. Often, those immediate demands are given at the direction of the battalion commander. In many cases, it is the commander's logistical capability that becomes the "tip of the spear." MCWP 3-33.5 explains:

In COIN, the support provided by sustainment units often extends beyond sustaining operations; support provided to the population may become an important shaping operation or even the decisive operation.⁵

The bottom line is: if the logistical web is not built to withstand rapid redirection of personnel and assets, the counterinsurgent Marine's mission will fail.

The Current Construct and Its Problems

In the current organization of Marine Corps logistics equipment and personnel, tactical control of medium lift assets, such as Medium Tactical Vehicle Replacements (MTVR), is

⁴ FM 3-24/MCWP 3-33.5, *Counterinsurgency*, 8-5.

⁵ FM 3-24/MCWP 3-33.5, *Counterinsurgency*, 8-1.

maintained at too high a level to be effective in the COIN environment. According to its Table of Equipment, an infantry battalion is allocated no medium lift transportation or material handling assets.⁶ It is completely dependent on external support for the most basic medium lift requirements. Units that typically provide combat service support to an infantry regiment are the Combat Logistics Battalion (CLB) and the Division Truck Company. Subsequent support is portioned out according to regimental priorities. This leaves no organic capability for rapid reaction to immediate logistical requirements at the infantry battalion level.

The CLB is designed for general support missions across the Marine Air Ground Task Force and has the ability to fulfill direct support roles down to the infantry battalion level. It is not designed for direct support missions to the subordinate units within an infantry battalion.⁷ When the logistical web of squad and platoon-sized FOBs is considered, the idea of CLB general support assets and Marines being routinely devoted to resupply missions of small FOBs appears wasteful. This idea implies that a CLB would reduce its overall operational responsiveness to satisfy logistical requirements at the infantry squad or platoon level. The described use of CLB

⁶ United States Marine Corps, *Total Force Structure Management System: Unit TO&E Report, 3rd Battalion, 7th Marines*, (Washington, D.C.: 2007), 2.

⁷ United States Marine Corps, *Total Force Structure Management System: Unit TO&E Report, CLB-6*, (Washington, D.C.: 2007) 1.

assets is unwise for many reasons. First, CLB Marines are not infantry Marines nor are they logistics Marines who have trained with the respective infantry unit. They do not know the standard operating procedures (SOP) of the supported battalion and therefore may be more of liability than a combat multiplier. Second, the scope of a CLB's responsibility does not allow for the planning and execution of an infantry platoon concept of support. A CLB needs to be focused on the transition of operational logistics to the tactical level and not execution of tactical level logistics within a small unit. Third, a CLB is not familiar with the political, social, and/or economic pulse of the infantry area of operations because it does not live among the local population. In the COIN environment, a firm understanding of a population's nuances is vital and any disruption in the confidence of the local population may cause severe set-backs in the mission. Ultimately, a CLB is best suited to execute the push of operational logistics to established unit distribution points at the infantry battalion tactical level.

The practice of attaching platoons from Division Truck Company to each deploying infantry battalion has become common, but is a byproduct of the Operation Iraqi Freedom model. In a conventional fight, tactical control of these Truck Platoons resides with the regiment, not the battalions. The Truck

Platoon is designed to provide general support transportation of personnel or supplies within the regiment.⁸ Though the Truck Platoon has a better knowledge of the area of operations and a closer relationship with the infantry battalions than the CLB, it does not fill the function of supply distribution between the battalion logistics sections and each of its forward operating bases (FOB). The missions of the general support Truck Platoon directly correspond to the regimental commander's logistical priorities. However, if the Truck Platoon is attached to a battalion, the respective battalion logistics officer can harness the transportation capability of that platoon and efficiently respond to the immediate needs of the battalion and its unique area of operations. In order for that platoon to be truly effective, time for combined training and mastering battalion SOPs before deployment must be provided. Unless the Truck Platoon is attached to his battalion, the Battalion Logistics Officer has no tasking authority and therefore cannot factor those assets into his immediate logistics planning, despite the unlimited potential for employment.

⁸ United States Marine Corps, *Total Force Structure Management System: Unit TO&E Report, Division Headquarters Battalion*, (Washington, D.C.: 2007).

The Enhanced Logistics Section Model and Its Benefits

In a recent deployment to Afghanistan, Battalion Landing Team (BLT) 1/6 faced extended lines of communication up to 55 kilometers, equipment shortages, and extremely high operations tempo.⁹ Marines adapted to resource shortfalls and responded to a volatile counterinsurgency environment. The BLT 1/6 After Action Report cites logistical deficiencies throughout the 101 page document. Key recommendations from the battalion logistics officer include training and conducting exercises with forklift and MTRV Wrecker operators. The report also suggests that 10 MTRVs be added to the infantry battalion table of equipment.¹⁰ These recommendations bear similar requirements realized by battalions serving in Iraq.¹¹ By consolidating the common requirements, the frame work for the enhanced logistics section is established (See Figures 1 and 2 below).

⁹ Battalion Landing Team 1/6, *After Action Review (AAR) and Lessons Learned From Operation Enduring Freedom Phase III*, 25 September 2008, 77-78.

¹⁰ Battalion Landing Team 1/6, 78.

¹¹ Author's personal experience during two deployments, OIF 05-07 and OIF 06-08.2.

Equipment	Quantity
MTVR (Short Bed)	10
MTVR (Long Bed)	1
MTVR Wrecker	1
M149 Waterbull	8
M105 Trailer	4
SIXCON (Fuel)	2
SIXCON Pump Module (Fuel)	1
Engineer Equipment Trailer	1
TEREX 5,000 lb Ext Boom Forklift	1

Figure 1. Proposed equipment additions.

MOS	Quantity
(3531) Motor Vehicle Operator	4
(3536) Wrecker Operator	2
(3521) Motor Vehicle Mechanic	2
(1345) Engineer Equipment Operator	1
(1341) Engineer Equipment Mechanic	1

Figure 2. Proposed personnel additions.

MTVRs provide a personnel and supply carrying capability that is versatile and configurable for almost any mission. M105 Cargo Trailers and M149 Waterbulls can be interchanged or dropped as the mission requires. These trailers give the unit additional

cargo space as well as water storage and transportation capability. The Terex 5K Forklift would be used to expedite the loading and unloading of resupply convoys, assist the offload of assault support missions, and facilitate the internal movement of supplies within the battalion command post. Finally, the MTRV Wrecker not only provides a versatile recovery platform, but also brings a mobile maintenance and crane capability that has proven invaluable to many units in Iraq, Afghanistan, and numerous training exercises.

These additions in equipment and personnel provide a much needed level of self-sufficiency that would benefit the infantry battalion, Truck Platoon, and CLB alike. By establishing a limited organic transportation, recovery, rapid on-load/off-load, and water storage capability at the infantry battalion level, routine requirements are solved at a lower level, therefore freeing assets in the general support units to conduct general support missions.

Regimental Combat Team (RCT) 2 experienced many logistical challenges in its deployment to Al Anbar, Iraq from December 2006 to January 2007. The concept of support established between the regimental headquarters, its combat service support units, and subordinate infantry battalions was designed to locate support capabilities as close to the battalion FOBs as

possible. In a February 2009 *Marine Corps Gazette* article, the RCT-2 Logistics Officer observed:

The size of AO Denver and the great dispersion between supporting and supported elements significantly impacted the responsiveness of the logistics support network ... It was also readily apparent that it was necessary to weight the battalions with additional capabilities to increase self-sufficiency and reduce response time to the forward positions. These additional capabilities improved distribution within the battalion AO, reducing the dependency on RCT coordinated distribution via external support.

In the same article, he lists the equipment that he distributed to each subordinate element and states how these capability sets, when resident with the battalion FOBs, eliminated sourcing and the "last tactical mile" distribution requirements placed on the RCT and CLB.¹² He further states, "With these additional assets, the battalion was well equipped to quickly respond to the needs of its subordinates."¹³ Each of these statements clearly reinforce the requirement for establishing a permanent medium lift capability at the battalion level.

¹² Jersey Reyes, "Sustaining COIN: Capabilities Requirements to Support Operations," *Marine Corps Gazette* 93, no. 2 (2009): 30.

¹³ Jersey Reyes, 30-31.

The enhanced logistics section model provides a means to move troops and personnel internally without over-burdening the CLB and Truck Platoon. It gives the commander an immediate tactical reach and swift response capability while increasing logistical efficiency. Movements of squad and platoon-sized elements are accomplished in a timely manner without pausing to conduct external coordination. Coordination is still be required for larger movements involving one or more reinforced companies, but this would occur on a less frequent basis. Tempo is generated from being able to react quickly to immediate logistics requirements from Marine forces or the host nation. And finally, being a permanent part of the unit would allow for adequate training and standardization of skill sets for each vehicle operator and mechanic. Ultimately, the enhanced logistics section model presents the commander with options that have direct impact on his ability to achieve success in the COIN fight.

Counterarguments and Rebuttals

Critics argue that if an infantry battalion Table of Equipment is increased to include medium lift assets and personnel, there would be a shortage of garrison maintenance and

storage facilities.¹⁴ Admittedly, to accommodate an enhanced logistics section, expanded areas for equipment and personnel are required. Considerations for maintenance bays, tool sets, motor pool space, and living quarters are details that must be resolved. Adjustments in the current garrison support infrastructure will take time, but temporary solutions are available. There is nothing holding units back from constructing field type maintenance bays. Testing and diagnostic equipment can be centralized to reduce the cost or contracted maintainers can be organized and rotated between units. This practice has experienced success and generated higher maintenance readiness levels in OIF.

Training of the MTRV operators is also a concern for those worried about standardization and performance evaluation. MTRVs are currently being operated at the infantry battalion level by school-trained Marine vehicle operators. Incidental MTRV licensing programs are offered at most MSCs and can be organized without much difficulty. One concern voiced is that of sustainment training and how an infantry battalion would ensure secondary and sustainment training of its operators.¹⁵ Infantry units send infantry Marines to squad leader's course and mortar team leader's course; nothing stops the logistics community within each infantry regiment from offering a course designed to

¹⁴ Ryan Weischeyer, conversation with author, 2 October 2008.

¹⁵ Christy McCutchan, conversation with author, 2 October 2008.

train NCO level vehicle operators. Regiments can consolidate expertise and give classes designed to develop truck team leaders and sustain junior drivers on techniques taught in MOS school. Infantry battalions and regiments can adopt the same training a CLB uses to train its drivers and eliminate any question of standardization.

Conclusion

The ability of a Marine Corps infantry battalion commander to sustain influence within his battle space is directly proportional to the unit's organic logistics capability. In order to maximize the battalion's influence in the counterinsurgency fight, its logistics section must be enhanced with medium lift assets and personnel. Recent conflicts have proven the requirement for an enhanced logistics capability at the infantry battalion tactical level. If the Marine Corps heeds the words of General Conway and prepares for "the full range of contingencies the future will undoubtedly present," the enhanced logistics section model gives each infantry logistics officer the tools to ensure responsive support when facing any counterinsurgency environment.

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